

Europe tackled over Channel freight

By John Barfield

European Commission officials could give little encouragement to an RDS delegation which protested about the way the Channel Tunnel was encouraging the growth of road freight.

RDS international committee member Richard Macqueen said that Channel Tunnel rail freight is being allowed to stagnate while lorry-borne freight on Eurotunnel is booming.

The situation is highlighted by the fact that Eurotunnel is buying more shuttle trains to take more lorries!

At a meeting with commission officials in Brussels in December, Mr Macqueen pointed out that RDS had campaigned for years for the Channel Tunnel so that more international freight could go by rail for the whole of its journey and everyone could benefit from the reduction in traffic and pollution.

Now there are more international lorries than ever coming on to our roads via the Eurotunnel shuttle trains.

Heinz Hilbrecht, head of the European Commission passenger transport unit, said the issue had been blown out of proportion.

There seemed to be a consensus that Eurotunnel had adjusted its tariffs to adapt to the needs of the market. If there were any particular examples which could be given he would be interested to hear of them.

Mr Hilbrecht did not address the issue of the unfair overall issue of freight paying its track costs although at an earlier meeting with the commission we had been assured that there would be commission-funded research into how costs could be more fairly allocated.

RDS has long been pointing out that lorries do not pay their track costs (as trains have to) and rail is not given any financial recognition for its massive environmental benefits.

We can probably assume that, as in Britain, the road lobby has been effective in blocking any action on this front.

RDS team leader John Barfield also highlighted our fears that a second Channel Tunnel could be built for road traffic only. Again the commission officials were non-committal.

The RDS team raised the problem of rail cutbacks in countries worldwide and particularly in countries hoping to join the European Union. We suspect that East European countries are being encouraged to promote road traffic. Gunther Hanreich,

The RDS team travelled to Brussels by plane, despite trying without success to get a competitive ticket on Eurostar. Other people who travelled on Eurostar during the same period reported that the trains were almost empty. Maybe Eurostar should consider introducing lowering fares to Brussels.

European Commission director for inland transport, said the commission wanted to see the environment protected in the field of transport investment.

Mr Barfield also raised fears about other international developments and said RDS did not want Europe to sign up to anything involving the World Trade Organisation which would stop member countries encouraging the use of railways.

We did not want to see third world countries being pressured to close "uneconomic railways" or to build roads. Neither did we want the European Union to put pressure on any countries which want to join the EU to make financial cuts affecting their railways.

RDS also raised the problems of north of London Eurostars not being able to carry passengers from, say, Leeds to London.

We understood it was caused by the UK not signing up to the Schengen agreement.

Mr Hanreich said that this had nothing to do with Schengen which was totally irrelevant to the issue. Nevertheless he seemed to accept that it was a problem which needed to be addressed.

He advised us to raise this issue and others with the International Union of Public Transport and the Community of European Railways.

The RDS team was able to congratulate the commission on three initiatives.

One recent draft European directive and communication is aimed at addressing the differences between national systems which complicated cross-border operations and made them less competitive, such as incompatible energy and signalling.

Another paper is aimed at providing an impetus to deal with rail "bottlenecks". £126m has been allocated for this under the Trans European Networks programme.

The commission has also introduced a package of proposals to help make Railfreight more competitive and maintain high safety standards. The RDS team asked whether European Union funding would be available for the Central Railway project. The commission team said the question was not relevant because Central Railway had not applied for funding. Mr Barfield

raised the issue of UK railway privatisation and whether the formation of Railtrack and the individual train operators was really necessary to comply with European law.

Mr Hanreich said it was entirely up to the member states how they went about it. The EU would not therefore expect Belgium and Netherlands to privatise their railways, only to separate operations from infrastructure.

Because road hauliers did not own the road, the airlines the air traffic control systems or the shippers the ports, the railways should be brought into line.

Mr Macqueen asked if the commission was aware of any infringements of European competition law and Mr Hilbrecht said he had not been made aware of any complaints but some anomalies were being investigated. The commission would require strong proof before it could take action.

Mr Barfield then moved on to the result of the RDS survey into international rail ticketing within the UK where it seemed difficult to book through journeys for anything outside Eurostar. Mr Macqueen also cited some of his personal experiences of this problem.

Mr Hanreich emphasised that this problem was not peculiar to

Britain and cited many other similar European examples from his own experiences.

He said it was all a question of compatible computer systems and when this had been addressed the problem would be largely solved.

Finally Mr Barfield raised the proposals for 68-tonne lorries and whether they were in the best interests of European Railfreight. Mr Hanreich said this problem had been completely misunderstood. There were no proposals for raising lorry weights and there probably never would be.

The commission had had so much trouble harmonising existing lorry weights throughout Europe that it was unlikely to embark on another round of doing so.

It was true that some EU countries, such as Holland and Sweden, had higher lorry weights than the rest of Europe but that was a purely local issue. The commission would not seek to impose them on other countries.

The only adjustments proposed were in connection with combined transport where some amendments may be necessary for the road leg of rail-borne lorries.

■ The international committee has been working on a European chapter for the RDS Easy Rail pamphlet which has been praised for highlighting the needs of passengers and has been quoted as the way forward for train operators.

Stansted airport links

By Trevor Garrod

The merit of a partly restored, partly new, rail route between Braintree and Stansted Airport has been recognised by the panel examining the Essex County Structure Plan.

This is the response that RDS had been hoping for. We have called upon Essex County Council to accept the need for an up-to-date feasibility study. Thanks are due especially to David Bigg and Richard Pout for putting the RDS and Witham Braintree Rail Users' Association case for such a link at last year's Examination in Public of the Structure Plan.

The county council has also indicated it will be discussing the issue with the Strategic Rail Authority. Meanwhile, land at Cut Throat Lane, Witham, which

would be the obvious site for a curve to enable trains to run direct from Colchester to Braintree and beyond, was put on the market in December.

David Bigg and Trevor Garrod made representations to the local authorities, and we are pleased that Braintree District Council has registered an interest in the land.

RDS has long campaigned for better rail services to Stansted which is growing at an increasing pace.

Five years ago we highlighted the need for a line to Braintree by staging a sponsored cycle ride along the route to Stansted much of which is now taken up with a cycle track and country walk. The new line could be built on a completely new alignment.